Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, & Transformation*

*Amplifying Marginalized Voices in Interpretive History*

Aaron J. Robinson*  
Bangor University, Bangor, UK  
ajr@aaronjrob.com

Abstract

Reception history is gaining popularity as an interpretive approach to Scripture. The dearth of extant primary sources in biblical interpretation from the African American community before the Civil Rights Era can present challenges for hearing black voices in reception history. In her remarkable monograph, Lisa Bowens examines sermons, letters, public addresses, and essays from African Americans, as early as the eighteenth century, surveying their engagement and interpretation of Pauline texts and Paul as a biblical figure. Her work elevates the voices of African Americans, while presenting an exceptional model of reception history at work. Her research demonstrates early African Americans using Scripture, particularly the letters and life of Paul, for rebuttal and reform of social injustices.

Keywords

reception history – Pauline theology – social justice – hermeneutics – minority voices – slavery

According to Ulrich Luz, readers, especially of Scripture, ‘are never autonomous subjects but owe themselves to the text they read.’

* Aaron J. Robinson (MDiv, Moody Theological Seminary) is an adjunct professor at Moody Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois, USA, and a PhD candidate at Bangor University, Bangor, UK. He can be reached at P.O. box 430351, Pontiac, MI 48341, USA.

(Wirkungsgeschichte) can be viewed as a type of reversed intertextuality, in that it ‘does not seek to identify how a given text is anchored in the past and in older texts, but how it has influenced its future and our past – how our world is connected by its “intertextuality” with the text that we are interpreting’.\(^2\) It is not interpretation in and of itself; rather, it illuminates the power of the text and consequences of interpretation, which helps the hermeneut recognize that interpretation ‘is not simply playing with words but an act with historical consequences’.\(^3\) Those consequences take many shapes and forms, across a variety of media types. Wirkungsgeschichte takes a critical look at how the text is received and actualized in media other than commentaries – in verbal media such as sermons, canonical documents, and ‘literature’, as well as in nonverbal media such as art and music, and in the church’s activity and suffering, that is, in church history.\(^4\)

In other words, interpretation begets ideas (sermons, songs, art, creeds, etc.), and the resulting ideas often beget policies, cultures, societies, and movements. For hermeneuts in the African American community, reception history can serve as a vital methodological approach in biblical interpretation. Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr. note that in Scripture, [African Americans] found not just an otherworldly God offering spiritual blessings, but a here-and-now God who cared principally for the oppressed, acting historically and eschatologically to deliver the downtrodden from their abusers. They also found Jesus, a suffering Savior whose life and struggles paralleled their own struggles. In the biblical narratives that describe these characters they found reasons to believe not only in the liberating power of the God of Scripture, but in the liberating emphasis of Scripture itself.\(^5\)


\(^3\) Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 33. See also p. 30, ‘the investigation of the history of influence of the texts can make a decisive contribution to the understanding of texts, even though it is a limited contribution and must be supplemented by other approaches, for example, sociological and psychological reflections.’


Reception history also presents a challenge for African American hermeneuts. In many of our libraries and historical archives, there exists a lacuna of early primary sources produced, published, presented, or performed by African Americans. The African American's social experience has always been closely connected to Scripture and its interpretation. It, therefore, behooves the contemporary African American scholar to become acquainted with the various ways in which Scripture has been interpreted by early African Americans, as well as how these interpretations shaped the African American contribution to societal practices and policies.

It is to this challenge that Lisa Bowens rises, with her authoring of *African American Readings of Paul*. In her engagement with early and modern African American interpreters, Bowens does not suggest that there is one African American perspective of Paul; rather, her work presents, ‘the many insights of black interpreters who read, preached, and studied Paul's letters and will allow their voices and ideas to come to the forefront’ (p. 10). In reading this formative monograph, scholars in the African American community and beyond will most certainly appreciate the great lengths through which Bowens has gone to acquire a treasure of primary resources. Her research offers a fine model of reception history at work – surveying sermons, letters, public addresses, and even personal testimonies of early African Americans dating back as far as the early eighteenth century. Bowens’ Pauline scholarship, and familiarity with his epistles shines in her engagement with early African

---


“Although African American believing communities have been interpreting the Scriptures for centuries, the method has not been as systematically articulated or described in literature as has the Eurocentric method. African American biblical students are products of an African American culture that, perhaps imperceptibly, yields a methodological orientation during and after academic training.”


The Bible has continually ignited their creative energies and sustained their determination to live in ways consistent with their understanding of themselves as creations of God. This means that African American Christians have, throughout their history, brought to the Bible *a priori* interpretive principles through which the meaning of the Bible was validated.


8 In-text citations of Bowens, *Readings*, will be enclosed in parentheses.
American interpreters. Her acquaintance with Paul helps her to highlight allusions and contours in the early works that she surveys.

Though titled, *African American Readings of Paul*, readers will find much more in their engagement in this book than surveys of Paul’s letters. Bowens places Pauline texts at the forefront of her research, but throughout her investigation of early resources, non-Pauline texts (both OT and NT) are engaged in ways that help to illuminate African American readings of Scripture in general, not Paul only. Readers will encounter the way African Americans read Pauline texts, but even more, they discover how they read Paul, *bonds servant of Christ* (Rom. 1.1), or Paul, *apostle of Christ* (1 Cor. 1.1) – finding solidarity and commonality with the NT author. Bowens records this solidarity as early African Americans viewing Paul as ‘a Figure of Liberation and Equality, and of Shared Experience’ (pp. 293–96). It is through such reception readings of both the letters of Paul and the person (and experiences) of Paul that resistance and transformation are seen to emerge.

Though addressed in her concluding chapter, this ‘shared experience’ is evidenced throughout the book. Examples of this solidarity with Paul include her record of Jupiter Hammond’s address to negro slaves, where he shares Paul’s apostolic truth and sincerity when he wrote to his own Jewish kinsman (Rom. 9.2–3) with a heavy heart (pp. 41–42). More than solidarity, Bowens suggests, ‘Paul assists [Hammond] in telling his story regarding his deep longing for his people and his recognition of their “poor”, “despised”, and “miserable” state’ (p. 42). Jarena Lee compared her calling to share the gospel in her hometown of Cape May post-conversion to God’s calling Saul of Tarsus to Jerusalem, as Paul the converted (p. 81). Zilphah Elaw used Pauline language to describe her conversion, and the many spiritual encounters in her life and ministry (pp. 83–87).

These are but a few examples of the hermeneuts covered in *Readings*. What these accounts demonstrate is that African American hermeneuts sought more than to make sense of the text; for them, the text was to inform how to make sense of their Christian experience as African Americans, and subsequently of life and society in general. Bowens’ effective employment of reception history casts light on the implications of African American interpretation. Their arguments and addresses reflect their understanding of Scripture, especially in the Pauline texts, that had been used by their oppressors to justify hatred and bigotry. Three aspects of this work that make it seminal for future African American scholars are its breadth, the salience of topics which early African Americans addressed, and contemporary overture.9

---

9 These are three aspects that I found valuable. As my research in the Apocalypse employs a twenty-first-century, African American, Pentecostal hermeneutic, it was helpful to have a
In matters of breadth, Bowens begins her exploration of early sources in the eighteenth century. Rather than dividing her exploration of these sources in chapters by the centuries, Bowens orders them by eras, with centuries overlapping. With such a chapter division, she introduces each era with a brief synopsis of the milieu in which the interpreters emerge; including laws, legislation, and social challenges that African Americans faced. With each hermeneut engaged, Bowens interweaves pieces of their narrative and their interpretation of Pauline passages. Her inclusion of their narratives assists the readers in understating the hermeneutical perspective of the interpreters. Reception history done this way makes it evident how much milieu and methodology are intertwined. What is modeled is how era informs experience, and experience informs exegesis.

In the African American community, much attention has been given to Paul’s letters and how they were used in subversive ways – especially in matters of slavery and racism. Paul’s letters,

played an enormous role in justifying slavery and promoting slavery as a Christian practice. Paul’s words were central to the debate between those who advocated slavery and those abolitionists who fought against slaveholding.

Bowens, p. 5

We are often reminded of Nancy Ambrose, grandmother of Howard Thurman, who refused to have the Pauline letters read to her, owing to their use by slave masters to justify their abusive behavior. Bowens gives witness to how Ambrose’s Sitz im Leben informed her (and subsequently Thurman’s) interpretation of Paul (p. 230). The breadth of her work is also found in the diversity of interpreters that are engaged; male and female, slave and free. This diversity brings us beyond the more popular view of Paul as an advocate of oppression in the eyes of early African Americans – also presenting Paul as an advocate of liberation in the eyes of some early African Americans.

By beginning her engagement in the early eighteenth century, Bowens introduces her readers to hermeneuts who are unknown, unpopular, or both. This introduction is especially helpful in matters of African American interpretation of Scripture. This early engagement amplifies the African American model to follow, as it pertains to engaging early African American sources. As a Pentecostal, there are many extant sources available by way of periodicals, sermons, and historical monographs; but, as has been established above, such is not the case for African American sources.
voice in interpretive history. Many twenty-first-century biblical scholars are familiar with the works of popular twentieth-century scholars like Howard Thurman, James Cone, Martin Luther King, Jr., J. Deotis Roberts, and others. These scholars are well known for their public address of social injustice and civil rights. Bowens’ work is a faithful witness that African Americans have brought Scripture to bear on salient topics, long before the Civil Rights Era. Moreover, the subjects that have been addressed by these early interpreters extend beyond racial concerns. Through sermons, letters, testimonies, and more, readers encounter early interpreters addressing matters such as sexism and patriarchy (pp. 77, 171), social justice (p. 236), politics (pp. 196–97), and more.

In addition to breadth and salience, Bowens offers observations that have contemporary significance. One of those observations, worth quoting at length, is how early African Americans utilized Pauline texts (those dealing with the family/household code in particular) to argue for identity and personhood:

The enslaved Africans insisted that their identity as members of biological families was primary; their identity as husbands, wives, and children negated American slave status. When Paul spoke of families, he included them, and so they insisted that the apostle recognized them as human beings with families that needed nurture and love like any other. *Black families mattered,* and by insisting on this truth they asserted their personhood and their humanity.

Bowens, p. 25, emphasis mine

It is difficult to read this statement, and not think about some of the social outcries of today – *Black Lives Matter,* in particular. Church leaders (African American or other) seem to struggle with how to engage in empathetic dialogue, biblically, on this topic. Oftentimes, when someone hears the phrase, ‘Black Lives Matter,’ the discussion becomes a matter of gender identity and sexuality, or a debate about pro-choice vs. pro-life. Bowens shows how early African Americans have historically and biblically argued that Black lives do indeed matter, but void of the extra-social issues that can, and often do, eclipse the subject today.

In her conclusion, Bowens poses the question, ‘Where do we go from here?’ (p. 305). In an effort to answer that question, it is best to understand where ‘here’ is. The ‘here’ to which she refers is a multifaceted space. There is the hermeneutical space in general, as it relates to African Americans and our engagement with Scripture. Bowens is among a company of great African American scholars who have contributed monograph length dialogues in this
space, including (but not limited to) Esau McCaulley’s recently published, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. Earlier titles include *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder,10 Vincent L. Wimbush’s *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History*, and *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* by Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr. In one case, ‘here’ is the convergence of African Americans and the Bible. Like Bowens, these scholars amplify voices in the margins; they give volume to voices that have long been ignored in interpretive history. Moreover, they give insight and context to those words from a vantage point of scholarship and hermeneutical competency.11

The second ‘here’ space from which we are to go is one of Pauline studies. As Bowens explains in her opening chapter, the African American community has a deep relationship with Paul’s letters – a relationship that has been often associated with Nancy Ambrose’s relationship with Paul, as conveyed through Thurman. Thus, the second space is concerned not only with interpretation, but relationship and implication as well. It is in this space where Bowens recognizes a ‘hermeneutic of trust’ for Paul, among many early African American interpreters – in contrast to a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion to the white interpreters of the text, such as the slaveholders, proponents of slavery, and advocates of segregation’ (pp. 297–98).

The third and final ‘here’ space from which we go is a matter of the contribution and posterity the African American community can lay claim to, as it relates to biblical interpretation. Reception history is the intersection at which the two previous spaces converge. A natural outcome is the amplification of the voices of black men and women. No longer is African American interpretation of Scripture through history a matter of scarcity. Scholars like Lisa Bowens have brought primary sources to public, homiletic, and academic spaces.

Having thus been supplied with early records of African American engagement with Scripture in general, but Paul in particular, and bearing witness to the reception of that interpretation, Bowens asks, rightly, ‘Where do we go?’

---

10 Cain Hope Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991). This work is a collection of essays by various African American scholars, offering various perspectives on African Americans and biblical interpretation.

11 These scholars do not act as mere historians reporting works cited; rather, they interpret the interpreters – and do so without obscuring the interpreter’s words. They bring their knowledge of Scripture, black history, and theology in general to their research. Their expertise enables them to become critical dialogue partners with the hermeneuts whom they engage – whether they agree or disagree with the perspectives they find.
The answer is as multi-faceted as the question itself, as it reaches across three streams of influence: (1) the congregational stream, in matters of homiletics, ecclesiology, and practical theology; (2) the academic research stream, as it relates to African American scholars hearing echoes of influence from their own community in interpretive history – this includes post-grad studies, as scholars pick up where the present work stops; and (3) the academic instruction stream, in regard to hermeneutics, NT studies, and Pauline studies – how professors and supervisors will use this work work as an instructional tool in biblical studies. Across these three streams, Readings stands as a work that is fit to encourage the pastor, educate the student, and equip the instructor.

Bowen’s fine model of reception history gives voice to lesser known and unknown preachers and their sermons – both men and women of the African American community. While the situations and perspectives of the surveyed interpreters have their differences, they share in a common thread – liberation, that is, God’s desire for freedom and equality for all of humanity. There is also present, though not explicitly stated, an imaginative nature to their interpretation of Scripture – the ability to see a world which they had not yet occupied, but God had designed, according to their understanding of the Word. Considering the societal conditions to which, and in which, these early hermeneuts raised their voices, African American pastors and preachers in posterity can be encouraged to raise our voices as faithful witnesses to the Word of God. We have witnesses of African Americans – slave and free, illiterate and educated, male and female, all speaking to and against the salient issues that fight against the liberation of God’s people. We too can imagine a world greater than the one we now minister in.

As scholars like Bowens continue to offer well-researched content like that found in African American Readings of Paul, African American students are no longer held captive to interpretations (and the effects of those interpretations) not reflective of their own community. Further, what Bowens models for researchers is how to engage with the past. She offers a non-biased look at what early interpreters in the African American community thought of Paul’s letters, as well as their reception of Paul himself. Bowens weaves history and methodology together, masterfully here. Her work is inviting to future scholars who may want to take up the mantle of Wirkungsgeschichte in the African American community, as there is much to still be discovered here, such as Johannine studies, apocalyptic studies, OT reception, and more.

With African American Readings of Paul, professors and supervisors in the academy are equipped with the tools necessary to introduce students to new interpreters and their interpretive methods. They can expose their students to hermeneuts who have contributed to discussions on human flourishing long
before them, even if their contributions have not been recognized in academic
circles previously. The value of Bowens’ work reaches beyond Pauline studies
and across theological disciplines – from hermeneutics to homiletics, ecclesi-
ology, NT studies, and more. Although ‘more research is important for docu-
menting black religious life within American religiosity, because black religious
life and experience are integral to the American landscape’ (p. 306), Bowens’
work certainly makes a fine contribution to this effort. African American scholar-
s are indebted to her for such a contribution to our community ... for our
community.